

From MIG To LSSIRT: A Support Staff Odyssey

by AnnaMarie Kehnast

Library support staff have been known to battle their way up the career ladder, searching for recognition in the library profession, nationally, statewide and regionally. John N. Berry, III, editor-in-chief of *Library Journal*, once wrote, “They are uniting, gaining strength and power, and coming on strong!” And today, if someone said the library staff is forming a MIG, one would wonder why it takes SCUDs and MIGs in the library to get things done! Not really; MIG stands for an American Library Association (ALA) Membership Initiative Group.

It all started to roll in January 1988, during the Midwinter meeting. ALA Council adopted “Guidelines for Quality in Continuing Education for Information, Library and Media Personnel” that had been presented by SCOLE, the Standing Committee on Library Education. These guidelines were later presented in an Annual program in New Orleans. Dr. Jane Robbins, SCOLE chairperson, would later ask the audience “Anyone interested in pursuing issues of support staff, please, sign-up at the end of the program.” The response of eager support staff in the audience was impressive. What was more shocking was there was actually a large untapped resource, right there at ALA; support staff who worked in the stacks, at the desks, bookmobiles and out in the branches. Had support staff finally found an opportunity to be recognized and to be heard on issues that they face every day on the job?

It was all happening so rapidly. We didn’t know each other, yet here we were making arrangements to assemble at the next Midwinter meeting in Washington, D.C. Fortunately, several support staff had the opportunity to travel to the SCOLE meeting in D.C. and encourage ALA to continue to pursue the “other librarian’s”(John N. Berry’s name) reasonable demands. On June 25, 1989, in Dallas, SCOLE launched the new Education for Support Staff Subcommittee. With every Midwinter and Annual ALA Conference, more library personnel joined the bandwagon. One might wonder “Why was the timing so right?” It wasn’t that we were starving for attention. One major factor at that time was that many states were developing associations for support staff and these state associations started to communicate with each other. Secondly, the Internet came along. We no longer had to worry about overspending the telephone budget. We were corresponding with support staff across the nation and as far away as the Canadian and Australian Library Associations.

Before we knew it, support staff from public, school, academic, corporate, special and library technician programs were in snowy, cold Chicago in the middle of winter asking “What do we want ALA to do for us?” but better yet, “What can we do for ALA?” Our group found a gem when we were assigned Margaret Myers from the Office of Library Personnel Resources (OLPR) to be our ALA contact. Margaret directed, interpreted, arranged, encouraged, and introduced us to library leaders, while helping us steer a path to success.

On January 6, 1990, in the basement of the Hilton Hotel in Chicago, our group developed a mission statement: “To provide a forum within ALA for addressing a wide variety of issues relating to library support staff, including, but not limited to, basic preparation and continuing education, career development, job duties and responsibilities and other related issues.” Our group hit the bricks, convention floor and social events with petitions searching for 125 signatures of ALA members, agreeing that a MIG was needed within ALA. Our group had collected the entire number of signatures we needed in only one evening!

Yet, there was still one major component missing—MONEY! It was here, thanks to Kathleen Heim McCook, who volunteered to write a grant, that we were able to win a “World Book-ALA Goal Award” for \$5,000.00. This grant made it possible to conduct focus groups to identify the top ten issues affecting support staff. With a whole lot of thanks and just a little convincing, Kathleen Weibel of the Chicago Public Library agreed to be our moderator for the focus groups.

In the meantime, Debbie Wolcott (Virginia Beach Public Libraries, Virginia) and I (Gloucester County College, New Jersey) co-chaired MIG, while Meralyn Meadows (Stanly County Public Library, North Carolina) was appointed secretary. As leaders of the pack, we accepted the challenge to become a viable round table in three years. We had this limited time to prove to ALA that our group of library staffers needed to be included under the umbrella of the American Library Association. ALA already recognized trustees and friends, so why not support staff? At that time, MIG had a following of over 700 names in our database. With the help of Meralyn Meadows and Virginia Gerster (Miami-Dade Public Library, Florida), we also developed a National Directory listing support staff associations and their officers.

By the start of 1991, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), SCOLE, Pay Equity, Library Administration & Management Association (LAMA) and the Staff Organizations Round Table (SORT) were teaming up with us to do joint programs at upcoming conferences. Our World Book group had a literature search in progress, and focus groups were identifying major themes and various individuals were addressing different aspects of support staff education.

At the end of MIG’s second year, we headed to San Francisco. There was no question. We knew we were ready for round table status. Once again, we would have to petition for ALA Council to approve the new status of round table. In the meantime, we were not aware that the Council of Library/Media Technicians (COLT), an ALA affiliate, was also petitioning ALA for round table status.

Because two similar groups had petitioned in the fall 1992 for round table status, ALA Executive Director Marilyn Miller sent letters to both groups. She directed the COLT and MIG groups to sit down with facilitators and discuss their needs and goals. She then suggested the groups submit a joint petition by the end of the Denver, Colorado, 1993 Midwinter meeting.

After several hours of lengthy debates on differences (such as, COLT members were overwhelmingly school and special library employees and MIG members were primarily academic), the groups conceded they had many more issues in common; training, continuing education, career/staff development, certification, pay equity, communication and networking among all levels of library personnel. At the end of the day on January 25, 1993, Beverly Patton, COLT President, and I, MIG Co-Chair, left Room A105 in the Colorado Convention Center to re-develop a joint mission statement, co-signed by both leaders. We assembled to gather more signatures, and submitted a new petition for the formation of the "Support Staff Interests Round Table, SSIRT." The petition was then presented and accepted by the ALA Committee on Organization.

Our new Support Staff Interests Round Table's mission statement was: "To provide an arena within ALA for addressing a wide variety of issues of concern to library support staff, including, but not limited to, basic training programs, education, career development, job duties and responsibilities and other related issues for the purpose of fostering communication and networking among all levels of library personnel. To be responsible for the immediate dissemination of information to national, state, regional and local support staff organizations."

At the end of the 1993 Annual conference held in New Orleans, the dream conceived in 1998 became a reality -- the Support Staff Interests Round Table was born.

The Library Support Staff Interests Round Table, now referred to as LSSIRT, will be ten years old this July, 2003. And, as I look back, the issues that we identified are still the same after ten years; certification, pay equity, job descriptions, career ladders and education. These issues have not been solved, but have been addressed through conference programming and discussion. Most of all, we are **recognized** as part of the **ALA Library Team**. Having been there since the beginning, I can say, "We've come a long way, baby!"

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